

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

I have heard that Dec. 25 was set as the date for the birth of Jesus so as to make it coincide with a Roman festival of the sun. Is that correct?

It is true that in 274 C.E., the Roman emperor Aurelian established a feast of the birth of Sol Invictus (the Unconquered Sun) on Dec. 25. That Dec. 25 was chosen for Christmas in order to coincide with this festival of the sun has been the commonly accepted theory for the past 300 or so years, but I am inclined to go with some recent scholarship that offers a different explanation for Christmas being set as Dec. 25.

The date of Dec. 25 for Christmas is tied to the date of Jesus' death, according to the liturgical scholar Thomas Talley (in his *Origins of the Liturgical Year*). He asserts that Christmas is on Dec. 25 because Jesus was conceived nine months before, on March 25, at the Annunciation, the same day he died.

You may rightly ask how we know Jesus died on the same day of the year

he was conceived or that he was conceived when the Archangel Gabriel appeared to Mary. We don't actually, but both are ancient Christian beliefs that resulted in Christmas being on Dec. 25.

The early Christian writer Tertullian (writing about 200 C.E.) tells us that Jesus died on "the eighth day before the calends of April" in the Roman calendar (that is, March 25). The anonymous Christian work, *On Solstices and Equinoxes* (fourth-century North Africa), tells us more: "Therefore our Lord was conceived on the eighth before the calends of April in the month of March [25 March], which is the day of the passion of the Lord and of his conception. For on that day he was conceived, on the same he suffered." The same work dates Jesus' birth to Dec. 25.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) also

THE REV.
WILLIAM G.
GARTIG



believed Jesus died on the same day he was conceived: "For He is believed to have been conceived on the 25th of March, upon which day also He suffered; so the womb of the Virgin, in which He was conceived, where no one of mortals was begotten, corresponds to the new grave in which He was buried, wherein was never man laid, neither before nor since. But He was born, according to tradition, upon December the 25th." (*On the Trinity*, Book 4, ch. 5)

The preceding references were all from the Western Mediterranean. Eastern Christians also dated Jesus' birth to nine months after his conception (annunciation) and death. They, however, came up with Jan. 6 (the

original Eastern Nativity, now the Epiphany) for Jesus' birth because they dated Jesus' death and conception to April 6, the 14th day, not of the Hebrew month of Nisan, but rather of the first spring month (Artemesios) in the Greek calendar. And Jan. 6 is exactly nine months after April 6.

By the middle of the fourth century most of the Eastern churches had given up the Jan. 6 Christmas in favor of Dec. 25, but the Church of Jerusalem held to Jan. 6 until 549, and the Armenian Church still observes Jan. 6 as Christmas Day.

If you would like to know more, see Andrew McGowan's article, "How December 25 Became Christmas" in the December, 2002, issue of *Bible Review*.

The Rev. William G. Gartig will answer your questions about the Bible, Episcopal life and other religious subjects. Send questions to 2146 Cameron Ave. Apt. 5, Cincinnati, OH 45212-3631 or at gartigwg@episcopal-dso.zzn.com.